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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the status of women's studies or courses in women's history that are offered in the colleges and universities in the state of Alabama. The results of the inquiries of the author were less than positive. It appears that there are not programs offered in this area in Alabama at the present time, nor are any plans being made to offer such courses. Thus the author proposes several steps to be taken to alleviate the lack of women's programs in Alabama and the South in general. (1) The source material for women's history must be developed and publicized and made accessible to the professional public. (2) The secondary works in women's history must be further increased and publicized. (3) Interdisciplinary curricula must be formulated in the area of women's history. (4) It must be realized that women's history includes activities even of the extremist elements and generally across the entire spectrum of the feminist movement, not only past but the immediate present as well. (5) Course outlines for women's studies must be developed and plans made for educating the professors who must teach those courses. (HS)

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PAPER FOR COLLOQUIUM ON "TEACHING OF WOMAN'S HISTORY"

Southern Historical Association Meeting: Houston, Texas

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When I realized I was to make a little speech about the teaching of women's history in Alabama, I was much tempted to say merely, "There ain't no such animal in Alabama," and sit down. At this moment I am still tempted to do just that.

Most of the concrete information I have, comes with very little of the usual scholarly credentials; that is, I have gathered it myself, off and on over the last six months or so, using none of the recognized sociological or statistical techniques. Mostly, I have simply asked a few basic questions, and what I have to report is therefore a summary of the answers--raw data, very crudely compiled.

For anyone who delights in consistency, this report will be most satisfying: it is almost uniformly negative. No women's history courses--not anyplace. And apparently very little intention or possibility of having any in the foreseeable future. At least not unless some very definite, if not drastic, steps are taken to change the picture, by those who feel it is important to do so.

It is my feeling that there is some connection (what, or how much, I am not at all sure) between some sort of feminist movement or organization on a campus and the teaching of women's history, either in or out of the regular curriculum. There are in Alabama twenty-four accredited colleges and universities. To each of these I sent two questionnaires, one to the Dean of Women and one to the chairman of the history department. Fourteen Deans and fourteen chairmen replied, not all from the same institutions (from seven institutions, only one reply was received);

five institutions did not reply at all; this in itself, I think, is a certain indication of the problems faced in the teaching of women's history. In some cases a reply referred me to one or more other people; in practically every instance those to whom I was referred were women, and some apparently had little or no connection with women's movements or history courses, but were indicated simply because they were women in the department. Of thirteen follow-up letters I sent to those to whom I was referred, I have received five replies.

The questionnaire sent to Deans of Women asked first, "Are there any women's (feminist) movements and/or organizations on campus?" and then requested information about them, if any. Eight replied no, one indicated that an "Associated Women Students" group was organizing. To the next question, "If there are no such groups, is there any reason (or reasons) for their absence?" a few responses indicated either lack of interest or lack of expressed interest. One reply from a black institution was, "Our female students feel that their concerns are common to those of their black male counterparts." The two affirmative replies indicated: an AAUP Chapter's Women's Rights Committee and a (faculty?) Senate Committee on Women and Minority Employment, both with little effect to date; and an institution's official AWS's establishment of a Women's Commission (on

which I have no further information.) . The final question, "Are there any similar off-campus groups with campus connections and/or membership?" got either the same reaponse as the first question or was simply left blank.

The questionnaire sent to history department chairmen asked first, "Are there any women's history courses now being taught on campus"? then the same but off campus, and finally "Are any Women's history courses being projected?" Response was uniform: thirteen nos out of thirteen replies, for all three questions. To the next question, "Do you have any comments concerning the teaching of women's history?" response was varied but primarily negative. Two expressed a certain interest in finding out about it; One was favorable, in terms of both separate courses and within other courses, and indicated the need to "include women in all Societies". Others indicated a lack of demand or any expressed interest in such courses. One said, "I do not believe it is a valid course." Others indicated a similar attitude by writing that the subject should be integrated in other courses, for one respondent at least at the lower level, with separate courses possible only in the upper division. For example, two replied (they are both male, although the above responses came from women as well), "I bring out the women in my regular classes" and "I conceive of history as the study of mankind--women children etc."

It has been said ad nauseam, and I am going to repeat it: before women's history courses become viable as a program, it will be necessary to "educate" the educators as to the validity and necessity of their content and relevance.

(The parallel to black studies should be apparent).

I think that perhaps those of our colleagues who come from large and prestigious institutions, frequently research-oriented into the bargain, and often located in areas where there already exists a multiplicity of women's movements, may not see very clearly the great need for basic ideas to be widely propagated. Where "Women's Lib" is still considered some sort of far-out joke at best, it is obviously difficult if not impossible even to discuss seriously the setting up of courses in Women's History. Indeed, the first problem normally would be to convince faculties that there <u>is</u> such a thing as women's history. (Need I mention again the parallel to black history?)

¶ The Parallels to black history may not be complete, but they are very strong. The black as slave, the woman as wife and mother--both defined in terms of an inherent destiny. Both groups therefore removed from the mainstream of History, essentially passive and with the potential only for influence, not for decision-making, initiative, independence. Both also seen as potentially very threatening to the continued control of others, therefore making necessary devices (legal, social, psychological, ultimately force) to prevent combination and action.

There is actually a growth of major proportions, dating at least from the '60's, in Women's history courses, Women's studies, etc.

Two things may be noted about this development. Most of it occurs in fairly large, well-known, and academically prestigious institutions. Most of it occurs in the Northeast to Midwest, and on the West Coast.

For example, "Sat. Rev." of Oct. 16, 1971, cites courses and/or programs at Cornell, San Diego State College, the University of Conn., Sarah Lawrence,

Barnard College, Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan University, Smith College, Princeton, and Buffalo (State of New York, University). The South as a section seems to be, if not barren of such courses, at any rate only infrequently fertile. As for Alabama, as I have indicated, in her twenty-four accredited institutions of higher learning there are no such courses.

There seem to me to be some glaringly obvious needs in this area.

I. We must develop and publicize, and increase professional access to, the source material for Women's History.

II. We must further increase, and especially publicize, the secondary works in Women's history.

We must particularly spread bibliographies as widely as possible. I have as yet to see a comprehensive bibliography; this may be my fault, but I could with ease put my hand on a half-dozen bibliographies of--say-- Asian or African history; I would not know where to go, immediately, for a bibliography in women's history.

Besides secondary materials being more widely available, they should be only "quietly" sensational. Shulamith Firestone's "The Dialectic of Sex," for example, might be included in a bibliography, but obviously to present it as an argument for dirriculum change or to a beginning survey class would have strong negative effects: it is both analytical and extreme, and under present circumstances it seems to me that most of us must start with the narrative History, and only then develop courses that go further. If this be gradualism, let's make the most of it; academically at least I can see no real alternative.

It is in fact revolutionary to get a women's history course into the curriculum, as matters stand now, even if it is merely a basic narrative. This basic narrative is revolutionary in a situation where most History teachers still assume that Women's role in history has been almost exclusively in the home, just as many still assume that the role of blacks in history has been almost exclusively as slaves in the cotton fields. The mere presentation of historical fact concerning individual women and women's groups must prove as unsettling to traditionalist views as similar statements about blacks in history.

III. We must realize the necessity of interdisciplinary work--with Literature perhaps primarily, with the social sciences, with law, with any relevant academic areas. For some time to come, the sources for Women's history and the course content may be primarily indirect.

¶ In Literature, we can examine all the reflected images, the underlying assumptions, and also consider the disparity between literature and life. One example of the latter is Hellenic drama, as for instance "Medea" and "Lysistrata," and the hetairism of the Age of Periles.

In the usual "social and cultural" courses, it would be effective to develop some of the now insignificant references to women: in the reform movements, for instance.

In "regular" history, there are any number of unexplored questions. Who, for example, ran Europe while all the heroic knights were off crusading against the infidel or otherwise disporting themselves in and around the Byzantine and Islamic empires? Exactly how much power did numerous queens

exercise directly and effectively: consider for example Isabella of Aragon, or even her ill-fated daughter Katherine, who fought and won a Scottish war while her husband was fighting, to his loss, in France. What really was the role of women in medieval and renaissance Europe? Did the abbess exert the same type of secular influence as the abbot? Was the merchant's wife, that rising bourgeoise, actually a business partner as well as conspicuously consuming the profits of the trade? What happened to the little girls of the Italian nobility, who at the age of seven [redacted] were [redacted] expected to be able to conduct a sensible conversation with the bishop, in Latin?

In each era we may examine the legal status of women as opposed to their public image: chattels without separate legal existence, in a time of courtly and/or romantic love.

How much real control over the economy did--or do--women have? Is it perhaps that they spend money in grocery and department stores, and in what ways is this simple spending affected by the influences of role concepts and advertising which are male-controlled? How much female influence is there at the decision-making level in crucial areas of the economy, such as the boards of banks, corporations, the Federal Reserve system, etc.? How much property in women's names has merely been transferred for legal and tax reasons and therefore represents no real ownership or effect? To what extent does the basic power to spend money shape the nature and development of the economy when so much influence is exerted, apparently effectively, on the (female) spenders to spend it on certain things and in certain ways, so that they are actually following directions rather than making decisions?

In sociology, the areas of socialization, of "marriage and the family", of role concepts and role playing, of the educational process, offer major issues to be re-examined.

In psychology, the whole question of the causation and modification of behavior must perhaps be reconsidered. To what extent, further , have Freudian assumptions colored psychological thinking?

IV. We must realize that women's history includes activities even of the extremist elements and generally across the entire spectrum of the feminist movement, not only past but also the immediate present.

V. We must realize the inevitable connection between women's history in the academic sphere, and the contemporary feminist movement (again, acros its entire range.)

A. The most objective and scholarly approach to women's history cannot possibly escape this connection being made in the public mind and in the minds of students, colleagues, administrators, etc.

B. The feminist movement provides invaluable insights, approaches, source materials, and frequently scholarly input, for the academic sphere. While much of this is in terms of contemporary history, not all of it is so restricted: witness the catalogue of source material from Source Book Press.

C. The feminist movement may itself be a course topic (past and present).

VI. We must provide well-thought-out arrangements of courses, in the organizational sense; that is, the possibilities of:

separate courses--in different departments, and interdisciplinary ones;

separate departments of women's studies; any other types; and perhaps combinations of these.

VII. We must consider the hopefully growing need for more and more qualified instructors, not only women, and not automatically whatever women happen to be on the faculty at the time a course is instituted.

VIII. We must consider some other associated issues and problems. These following were indicated in the same article in "Sat Rev" referred to earlier.

A. There is the vast problem of the generally inferior position of faculty (and administrative) women in higher education.

B. It seems to have been proved that the achievement of female students (certainly above the secondary level) is adversely affected by their acceptance of assumptions about their roles and about their inferiority.

C. There appears to be an almost exclusive concentration (not only by women's historians but also by the feminist movement) on middle-class white Christian women in America (and to some extent in England). This understandable but narrow emphasis must be broadened.

¶ From that same article in "Sat Rev" comes this quotation as to the objectives of women's history: "to provide alternative ways of looking at women and at the assumptions of our culture, including our sciences; and to provide new information about women, their history and their accomplishments." This is admirably concise and comprehensive, and many general survey courses in women's history could do worse than to take it as a statement of goals.

Finally, there are numerous problems confronting any who wish to begin or expand any types of courses in women's history. (These are effectively explored in the article). Budget cuts and a general financial tightening are affecting almost all academic areas, but may be most devastating in new and controversial areas such as women's studies. Male administrators may be less than enthusiastic about such programs and may be in positions effectively to cut them down or out. Fear of academic innovation, of weakening scholarship, of fragmenting the curriculum; resistance to including new material into already familiar specialties, resistance to new approaches in teaching methods, may all be expected. Among students as well as teachers, there will be the problem of radicals v. conservatives. Black and other minority students may question the priority of women's studies. Adverse or questioning reactions to the women's liberation movement may affect women's studies. The essentially controversial nature of the entire subject (at this point) poses particular problems to both researchers and teachers, and furthermore raises the question of whether or not there are, in the subject itself, certain inherent value judgments; here, as in other instances, the development and experiences in black studies may be most helpful. The possibility of token courses also exists, and there is no one solution to prevent it: even the control of such courses by women exclusively does not automatically guarantee a lack of tokenism. The whole question of the place of such courses and programs in the University as an institution is a very thorny one: for instance, should there be a particular aim of service to the women of the University; should there be separate centers or colleges for women's studies; should there be a separate degree in the area; should any of these be developed side by

side with material on women's history integrated into the curriculum? The general picture of women's history is, I think, rather bleak at this point and particularly in ~~this region of the country~~ the Southern region, and the problems are great. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that optimism is not out of place. There appears to be a rapidly growing interest in the subject, both in and out of the academic world, and even simple curiosity may be turned to advantage. Problems <u>can</u> be solved; cooperation <u>is</u> possible; there is no good reason to scuttle the ship before it is well out of the harbor. If we are committed, both personally and as scholars and teachers, to the strong and effective development of sound courses and programs; if we pool our efforts and share both our problems and our solutions; then we may well be on our way to adding a much-needed and long-overdue perspective to the <u>human</u> story.